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ABSTRACT

The professional society for counselors is the American Counseling Association (ACA). All individuals who offer or supervise professional counseling services or educate counselors should be ACA members. ACA provides members with access to new information through publications, professional conferences, and professional services. Membership in ACA allows counselors to continue their education and discharge their professional responsibilities. As a strong advocate for the counseling profession, ACA maintains an active government relations program at national, state, and local levels, educating legislators and governmental agency administrators regarding the positive contributions professional counselors make to society. Actions or policies that discriminate against counselors as a professional group are challenged and opportunities are sought to promote public recognition and support of counselors. (ABL)

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Counselor Membership in ACA

Lee J. Richmond and Theodore P. Remley

Overview

Counseling is a relatively new profession. When compared to the three most established professions in the Western world—medicine, law, and the clergy—counseling has only recently emerged as a unique profession recognized by members of our society as different from other similar professions. The last 50 years has witnessed the transformation of counseling from a vague concept or interest area to a profession, complete with all the rights and responsibilities thereof.

After decades of soul searching and political activity, counselors finally are enjoying the privileges that public recognition as professionals has bestowed upon them. Once society acknowledges a professional group as holding specialized skills that can only be evaluated and monitored by others in the profession, a public trust is implied. The consumers of professional services depend upon individual members of a profession to practice according to ethical standards. Consumers also depend upon other members of the profession to monitor individuals within the profession to ensure they are practicing in an appropriate manner.

The public expects professional counselors to be properly educated, aware of current knowledge in the field, and committed to practicing in a manner that benefits, and therefore does not harm, the clients they serve. In short, along with the many privileges recognition as a profession brings, comes a multitude of responsibilities as well.

Because consumers of professional services are often not able to evaluate the performance of professional counselors, then counselors themselves must accept the burden of ensuring their colleagues are adequately educated, current in their knowledge of the field, and practicing within established ethical standards (Walz, 1991). Professional societies or associations have been established as a means of helping professionals respond to their societal obligations (Herlihy & Golden, 1990).

The American Counseling Association

The professional society for counselors is the American Counseling Association (ACA). This organization is concerned with the practice of professional counseling and the advancement of the counseling profession. All individuals who offer or supervise professional counseling services or educate counselors should be ACA members.

The 17 national ACA divisions offer counselors opportunities to receive publications, attend conferences, and associate with other professional counselors in similar work settings or who share similar counseling interests. ACA members must belong to at least one division and most members belong to several.

ACA has 56 branches with one located in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Europe, Latin American, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, and the Philippines. Membership in a branch is optional. ACA members usually affiliate with the branch in the state or jurisdiction in which they live or work. Many professional issues for counselors (including licensure and state job classification systems) must be addressed at the state level. Branches include divisions that parallel national divisions and also offer local chapters. Chapters are made up of members who live close to each other and provide the opportunity for important local networking.

Necessity of Association Membership

For individuals who identify themselves as professional counselors, professional association membership is not an option; it is a necessity. Failure to be an ACA member isolates counselors and deprives them of access to new information. In addition, counselors who are not ACA members have not submitted themselves to the oversight of their professional colleagues—something the public demands from true professionals.

Not only do professional counselors fulfill societal obligations by holding membership in their professional societies, they also reap many personal and professional benefits that are not available to non-members. The mission of ACA is to enhance human development throughout the life span and to promote the counseling profession (ACA, 1992). ACA protects the public, establishes counseling credentials, provides access to information for counselors, offers professional services to members, and advances the counseling profession.

Public Protection

As a condition of membership, ACA requires applicants to promise to adhere to the ACA Ethical Standards (1988) that have been promulgated by the counseling profession. Members who are found to have violated the Ethical Standards are required to submit to a rehabilitation program or are expelled from the association.

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Credentials

Professional credentials benefit the counselors who hold them in several respects. They also help protect consumers of counseling services. Credentials provide a public indicator that individuals who hold them have met standards agreed upon by the profession, and therefore are legitimate counselors.

Although counseling credentials are granted by boards that are independent of ACA to avoid political influence, ACA has been responsible for creating and supporting counseling credential granting boards. Credentials include accreditation of university preparation programs (the American Counseling Association Council on Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP] and the Council on Rehabilitation Education [CORE]), national voluntary individual certification (National Board of Certified Counselors, National Academy of Clinical Mental Health Counselors, and the Board for Certified Rehabilitation Counselors), and governmental regulation of the profession (state licensure, certification of school counselors, etc.).

Access to Information

The education of a professional counselor never ends. Completing formal training programs in universities and supervised practice experiences simply allow counselors to enter practice. To continue their careers, counselors must keep current on new information being developed within the field (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 1993). The public expects and demands that professional counselors use the most effective methods of practice, regardless of how long ago their formal education and entry into the profession occurred.

ACA provides members with access to new information in a variety of ways. The scholarly journal, the *Journal of Counseling and Development*, and the many division journals offer new knowledge in the form of research and conceptual papers. The new magazine, *American Counselor*, updates counseling practitioners in the field. ACA publishes professional books, monographs, and media for the benefit of members. Professional conventions, conferences, and workshops bring new information to members through lectures, discussions, and demonstrations. *Guidepost*, the association newsletter, and division and branch newsletters inform members of events and news of particular interest to counseling professionals. Professional meetings of all types encourage members to network among themselves and learn from each other.

Professional Services

Members of ACA are offered services they need or desire related to their professional counseling practices. Professional liability insurance is becoming a necessity for all counselors and is offered at reasonable rates as a benefit of membership.

New professional counseling products are announced to members, reviewed, and evaluated. ACA members are given the opportunity to purchase services or products that will assist them in their practices at discount rates or prices.

Advancing the Profession

ACA is a strong advocate for the counseling profession. The association maintains an active government relations program at national, state, and local levels. Legislators and governmental agency administrators are educated regarding the positive contributions professional counselors are making to our society and the needs counselors have for continuing legislative and regulatory support. Actions or policies that discriminate against counselors as a professional group are challenged and opportunities are sought to promote the public recognition and support of counselors within society.

Conclusion

Counselors are achieving the recognition as professionals they have sought within our society. With this recognition, counselors have corresponding obligations. Membership in their professional society—the American Counseling Association — allows counselors to continue their education and discharge their professional responsibilities.

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If you are interested in becoming a member of the American Counseling Association and would like more information about their 17 divisions, contact the Association at 5999 Stevenson, Alexandria, VA 22304 or call 1-800-347-6647.

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